

“It Was I Who Did It”: Spies, Saboteurs, Couriers, and Other Heroines

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Although women and girls supported the war effort in traditional ways, some seized opportunities to serve in ways generally performed by men. The special circumstances of war allowed women to step out of traditional roles and act in ways that were heroic and unexpected for their time.

1. Positions in Occupied Cities, Military Camps, Homes and Offices

During the Revolutionary War women worked around common soldiers and commanders alike. They were cooks, laundresses, peddlers, maids and hostesses. With such easy access and the prevailing attitude that women’s minds weren’t capable of understanding military concepts, women could gather a great deal of important information. They were able to eavesdrop on conversations regarding troop movements, strategies and strengths as well as gather information on army size, supplies, fortifications and ammunition counts. Washington called these women “Agents in Place” (“Clandestine Women”).

One of the most well-known of these women was Anna Smith Strong. She was a member of the Culper Spy Ring which relied on local patriots to gather information for General Washington about the British occupation. Anna devised a system of hanging clothes on her wash line in a code that identified the locations of key British commanders and troop movements. In particular, a black petticoat signaled that operative Caleb Brewster was in town and the number and order of handkerchiefs identified the specific cove in which his boat was moored (Allen 56). Another famous member of the Culper Spy Ring has never been identified. She is known simply as agent 355. She played an important role in the counterintelligence activities that exposed Benedict Arnold and led to the arrest of the British spymaster, Major John André (“Clandestine Women”).

A Loyalist woman who used similar tactics was Ann Bates, one of General Henry Clinton’s spies. In a letter believed to have been written by Drummond, the leader of Clinton’s spy network, he describes her role: “it is proposed to send her out under the Idea of selling little Matters in the R.C. she will converse with Chambers: I will return whenever she may have learned any thing that shall be desired to be known” (“Women Spies”). The wife of a gunsmith and soldier, Ann knew what to look for as she moved freely through the American camps, posing as a peddler. As “Mrs Barnes she once reported to British spymasters that she was able to walk directly into the headquarters of General Washington and “had the Opportunity of going through their whole Army Remarking at the same time the strength & Situation of each Brigade, & the Number of Cannon with their Situation and Weight of Ball each Cannon was Charged with” (“American Spies of the Revolution”).

Another woman who used her position to gather information was Lydia Darragh. Although a Quaker, she found ways to aide the patriot cause since British soldiers were using a room in her home as a meetingplace. She would send information on British troop activities to her older son, hidden inside the buttons of her younger son’s coat (Roberts 80). When she overheard Howe planning a surprise attack on Washington, she used the pretense of buying flour from a neighboring mill to warn the army of the upcoming attack (Kneib 36). Women like Darragh appeared unassuming and thus moved more easily throughout the countryside making them ideal messengers and couriers.

2. Messengers and Couriers

Presumptions about the female sex made women successful as couriers. They were able to pass through guard posts and evade sentries with less suspicion, allowing them to deliver information and materials. Helping them with these tasks were the prevailing attitudes of the time that women were innocent and harmless. Housewives, young girls and older matrons seemed nonthreatening.

Deborah Champion was able to get intelligence through to Washington, despite a two days’ ride and being stopped by a sentry; she convinced him she was nothing more than a girl visiting a sick friend. Nathaniel Greene sent a letter requesting additional troops with a young girl named Emily Geiger. Emily was captured by a British scouting party, and took advantage of their reluctance to search her by eating the letter from the general before they could find a woman to search her. They apologized when they found no evidence she was a spy, and even escorted her to her uncle’s house; she was then able to relay the message in person to Thomas Sumter.

One of the youngest of these messengers was Sybil Ludington. One night when news came to Colonel Ludington’s home that nearby Danbury, Connecticut was under attack, it was up to his sixteen-year-old daughter Sybil to spread word to gather his regiment. As biographer Vincent Daquino put it, “Revere went 12 miles, Sybil, 40. She rode in the middle of the night, in the mud, with no helpers, and — she didn’t get

caught!" (Rooney). Because of her warning, the Putnam troops were able to help stop the British advance (Knieb 72).

3. Before and during the war, patriot women helped locate stores of ammunition and arms. Later they served as unsuspecting guards for these valuables and on occasion had them destroyed rather than surrendering them to the British.

British troops had turned Rebecca Brewton Motte's South Carolina mansion into a makeshift fort, forcing her and her children into a nearby farmhouse. American troops were holding it under siege when they received word that British reinforcements were coming; they felt their only option was to destroy the home and drive the soldiers out. When asked later about burning down her house, Rebecca defiantly told questioners, "It was I who did it...Let the consequence be what it will, I glory in having prevented the mischief contemplated by the cruel enemies of my country" ("Biographies"). She even provided the flaming arrows they would shoot through her windows, and the arrow's sheath later became her knitting needles' case (Roberts 114).

Betty Zane stepped up when things began to look dire at Fort Henry. The trapped patriot troops were low on ammunition, and their supplies were in a seemingly unreachable cabin nearby. Betty volunteered, knowing they couldn't spare any men, and hoping the soldiers would be hesitant to shoot a woman. She was able to successfully make it to the cabin and back unharmed, carrying the gunpowder in her apron (Schmittroth 215).

4. Direct Delivering of Arms, Fighting and Rescuing Soldiers

Sometimes women fought alongside their husbands, like Margaret Cochran Corbin. John took over when his cannon gunner was killed in a battle at Fort Mifflin. His wife Margaret began assisting him, but then had to load the cannon herself when John was also killed. She continued to fight until she was severely wounded. In 1790, the War Board made her the first woman to receive a military pension, saying "as [Corbin] had [courage] enough to supply the place of her husband after his fall in the service of his Country, and in the execution of that task received the dangerous wound under which she now labours, the board can but consider her as entitled to the same grateful return which would be made to a soldier in circumstances equally unfortunate" (qtd in Schmittroth 92-3). The DAR requested that she be honorably reburied at West Point (Roberts 79).

Another patriotic woman who bravely took on British soldiers was a slave woman named Mammy Kate. She was a large woman who volunteered to go into the British camp and rescue her owner when she learned that he had been captured. She hid him in a basket of laundry and nonchalantly balanced the basket on her head as she walked out of the prison, taking her master to safety.

The heroes of the American Revolution include brave men and women who risked their lives for the cause they believed in. Along with the Nathan Hales and Paul Reveres, the stories of patriots in petticoats deserve to be told as well.

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